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AUTHOR Juola, Arvo E.
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ABSTRACT

Data from a 1974 national survey of 134 colleges was presented to verify that grade point averages had increased.404 points from 1965 to 1973. Approximately two-thirds of the increase occurred since 1968 and the 1968 to 1970 period showed the highest average annual increments. Essentially, the same pattern and magnitude of change was revealed for college subgroups classified on the basis of size, geographic area, curricular emphasis, degrees offered, and public-private. Possible actions to counter the trend were cited but rational initial steps proposed more research to identify the scope of the problem and reasons for the movement. Dialogue to develop an institutional or unit perspective was considered an essential phase. Grade inflation was considered to be but symptom of a broader problem; namely, of an increased concern for student views and subsequent instructional innovations to adapt to these views. (Author)

GRADE INFLATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
What Can or Should We Do?

Arvo E. Juola
Learning and Evaluation Services
Michigan State University

The reality of rising grade point averages or grade inflation, as it is now called, is no longer in doubt. But you may be interested in data collected in my 1974 survey. This survey was sent to a stratified sample of 485 institutions with returns received from 195 colleges, a 41 percent return rate. I thought this was amazingly good until I got to the tabulating stage and found that only 134 institutions provided the necessary GPA data, making the real return rate only 28 percent. The response rate varied by size of college with the largest institutions responding at a 41 percent rate and smaller institutions at an 18 percent rate. This difference in response rates appears to be largely a functioning of the adequacy of institutional record maintenance systems.

The table presented in the handout gives data on the rate of increase in grade point averages from 1960 to 1973. The extreme right-hand column gives the composite change in GPA averages for the 14-year period. The total change for the primary sample was .404 points or an increase from say a 2.4 GPA in 1960 to a 2.8 GPA in 1973. The two adjacent columns at the right break down the change to two periods. These show that nearly two-thirds of the GPA rise occurred in the five-year period from 1968 to 1973. The figures at the middle of the table give average annual increments in grade changes for each of five periods. To get the total change for a period, you must multiply the average annual change in each period by the years in the time span.

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But what do the data show? The increments in the 1960-65 period, and perhaps even the somewhat larger gains in the 1965-67 period, show normal fluctuations in grade trend levels following a low ebb in grading levels in the post-Soviet Sputnik period. The larger movements since 1968 are those which have aroused so much popular attention among colleges and the news media.

What was particularly amazing to me was the generality of this trend toward higher grades. The same trend and nearly the same magnitude of change was evident when the data were studied by different types of colleges. It was present in private colleges as well as public, larger and smaller colleges, two-year and four-year colleges as well as colleges granting graduate degrees, for colleges in all geographic areas, as well as for colleges with a diverse curricular stress. Other studies have shown this trend to be also present in the public schools as well as colleges. It may be consoling to know that in our classes or our single institution we are not alone, that this is a universal phenomenon.

Some have asked whether changes in grades, such as these, are typical. Have not grade-point averages fluctuated in the past? Of curiosity, I charted annual changes in GPA's at Michigan State University back over 32 years to 1941. I did find fluctuations and could attribute these to dramatic events, such as World War II, the post-war college boom, sputnik, etc. But these fluctuations never moved more than one-tenth of a grade point from a base level of a 2.4 GPA; e.g., in the range from 2.3 to 2.5, that is, until 1968 when it jumped to 2.56 and then continued to near the 2.8 level in the early '70's. Clearly, the late 1960's period was atypical and distinctive with no historical precedent.

People have asked: What can we do to counter this trend? We have a large arsenal of possible actions. Let me cite a few possible solutions.

We can post and distribute recommended grade distribution for courses and levels. These would not be normal curve distributions, but rather skewed distributions with a range such as 0-5 percent F's, 10-20 percent A's, etc.

We can distribute current grading norms, those assigned by instructors in similar courses and levels to instructors to help guide them to prevailing practices.

We can use anchor tests, or other grades to make allowances for differences in student ability levels in classes or class sections for recommended grade distributions.

We can give the department head or a faculty committee the license to monitor diverse grading patterns by instructors and to recommend alterations in practices of the divergent instructors.

We can place courses with deviant grading levels on a pass-fail or credit-no-credit basis. This could, in fact, be automatically initiated when deviations of a specified magnitude are detected.

We can apply peer pressure from others in the department to work toward uniformity in grading standards.

We can take courses where the philosophy and evaluation methods are contrary to the philosophy underlying multiple grade levels; e.g., mastery models, and place these on a credit-no-credit or other more compatible basis.

Or, we can accept the trend - but build it into a planned and consistent philosophy, and this may be a realistic solution in selected institutions.

These and other actions are certainly possible; but these are, of course, not the immediate solution. A more rational initial step, if the situation appears out of hand, and it already is in the eyes of some, is to research the problem.

We should first get data on what is happening and where it is occurring, and this is what we are doing here at this symposium. It is amazing how few colleges were even aware of this inflation in grades two years ago even though rising grades had been operative for six years or more.

The next step is dialogue. Collectively, as a department, college, or institution, we must ask and resolve questions such as the following: What are we gaining and what are we losing if grade inflation occurs? What is happening and why? What is the best way to have grades serve the primary functions of higher education within our unique unit. If there are differences in perspective within the unit, how can these be resolved without destroying elements in the programs of others which they regard as precious.

We do know that whatever the grading philosophy adapted, it must be consistently followed by all staff members or the final product is meaningless. There is a place for academic freedom among faculty members in higher education but not with regard to the grading scale because deviation by a few destroys the meaning of the scale for all. A unilateral approach by individual instructors to combat grade inflation is also no solution. Consistency in grading is essential. For a few to move toward more severe grading would also result in inconsistency if others continue to be more permissive. Clearly, the solution, if one is needed, lies in problem-solving dialogue at identifiable administrative unit levels; and the goal should be to seek concensus, or at least compatibility, if diversity is evident.

This dialogue will, of course, have to identify what factors have contributed to grade inflation and what forces continue to operate. We already know or at least have a good basis for speculating about contributing factors.

We know, for example, when the movement started -- a short ten years ago, just past the mid-1960's. We know that the movement was amazingly universal and

encompassed nearly all collegiate institutions along with the public schools. Clearly, something dramatic and emotional must have occurred to initiate the movement. Looking back to the late sixties, the major stimulus must have come from intuitive decisions to "quiet down" a restive student body during the highly emotional climate of the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations. The seed and direction for reactions, however, probably go back to the mid-sixties when small but enthusiastic student-activist groups set the stage with their call for more relevance, more equality, less elitism, etc., and then tried to attach their reformist missions to the anti-war demonstrations.

We can also speculate about the mechanism being attempts by a few faculty members to satisfy what students seemed to want. These innovations often took the form of less-structured class styles, less-tangible class content, and more subjective evaluative techniques. These alternative class styles are obviously awkward to monitor, evaluate, and of course, grade; and higher grades are more often assigned when there is a less uniform or objective basis for justifying lower grades. Perhaps the latter is also a reason students seem to endorse courses such as these. When a sizable minority of faculty deviates, there is a temptation for others also to follow; and when a majority moves to a new grading level all must follow because to continue to maintain earlier standards would be divergent.

I believe that a primary key to the movement toward change lies in our growing concern with student views in institutional and course planning. We have become humanistic - and concerned by the student feelings. In fact, I have recently conducted a series of studies which suggest how using the student viewpoint as a guide leads to classes having progressively less structure, less prescription, and less instructor prescription control, or more student options and activity, less evaluation, etc.

There of course are other related factors which have contributed to grade inflation. I initially hypothesized 25 factors and tried to verify these on my original survey. Unfortunately, this analysis required identifying institutional trends at each college. The questionnaire respondents, however, were apparently unable to detect actual institutional changes. They seemed instead to report their personal feelings or philosophy rather than the institutional emphasis.

In summary, grade inflation in higher education is real and conspicuous. There are methods to combat the trend if we so desire. But, grade inflation appears to be but a symptom of other changes in higher education and dialogue to determine the desired institutional thrust seems to be a basic initial step. Implementing the final program with safeguards is then a later stage.

Table I
GPA Changes for Undergraduates in Collegiate Institutions from 1960-1973
(for the Primary Sample of Colleges with Graduate Programs)

	N of ?aires Returned	Range of Ns with GPA's Reported	Avg. Annual Chg. by Period					Total Change		
			1960-65	1965-68	1968-70	1970-72	1972-73	1960-68	1968-73	1960-73
All in primary sample	197	51-121	.016	.026	.056	.053	.028	.158	.246	.404
Public vs. Private										
Public	138	38- 94	.013	.026	.054	.057	.034	.143	.256	.399
Private	57	13- 27	.023	.026	.064	.039	.007	.190	.213	.403
Highest degree offered										
MA	102	16- 57	.018	.025	.059	.050	.033	.165	.251	.416
PhD	93	35- 65	.015	.026	.053	.055	.023	.153	.239	.392
Enrollment										
1001-5000	63	14- 29	.014	.018	.060	.051	.029	.124	.251	.375
5001-10,000	61	12- 40	.012	.020	.056	.056	.033	.120	.257	.377
10,001-20,000	42	11- 30	.025	.040	.050	.053	.012	.245	.218	.463
20,000+	28	14- 21	.013	.025	.059	.049	.034	.140	.250	.390
Metropolitan Population										
100,000 or less	87	24- 61	.014	.028	.049	.057	.043	.154	.255	.409
100,001-500,000	48	13- 31	.013	.024	.052	.060	.012	.137	.236	.373
500,001-1,000,000	15	6- 9	.012	.026	.066	.048	.038	.139	.266	.404
1-2 million	18	5- 11	.032	.023	.078	.029	.032	.229	.246	.475
Over 2 million	26	3- 11	.027	.035	.091	.026	-.006	.240	.228	.468
Geographic Area										
Northeast	40	9- 17	.017	.030	.057	.042	.030	.175	.228	.403
Atlantic	23	4- 14	.027	.020	.062	.063	.003	.195	.253	.448
South Central	27	7- 18	.025	.020	.039	.035	.061	.185	.209	.394
North Central	38	10- 27	.019	.039	.045	.049	.014	.212	.202	.414
Plains	22	9- 18	.012	.017	.059	.064	.037	.111	.283	.394
Rocky Mtn.	15	8- 13	.004	.024	.063	.072	.008	.092	.278	.370
West	30	4- 13	.010	.026	.089	.038	.037	.128	.291	.419
Curricular Emphasis										
Liberal Arts	40	8- 18	.025	.028	.061	.054	.010	.209	.240	.449
Sci. or Technology	27	12- 19	.014	.025	.063	.055	.040	.145	.276	.421
Business	19	3- 14	.024	.025	.060	.054	.006	.195	.234	.429
Education	47	7- 25	.005	.021	.056	.065	.043	.088	.285	.373
Balanced	43	18- 34	.016	.027	.051	.051	.020	.161	.224	.385
Indeterminate	27	3- 12	.011	.029	.043	.027	.046	.142	.186	.328
Sample size for all MA-PhD sample by Time Periods	197	51-121	51	70	94	121	109			

Table II
GPA Changes for the Supplemental Samples
(2 and 4 year colleges)

4-year colleges	33	3- 9	.030	.013	.098	.050	.027	.189	.323	.512
2-year colleges	34	6- 19	.019	.021	.028	.058	.061	.158	.233	.391